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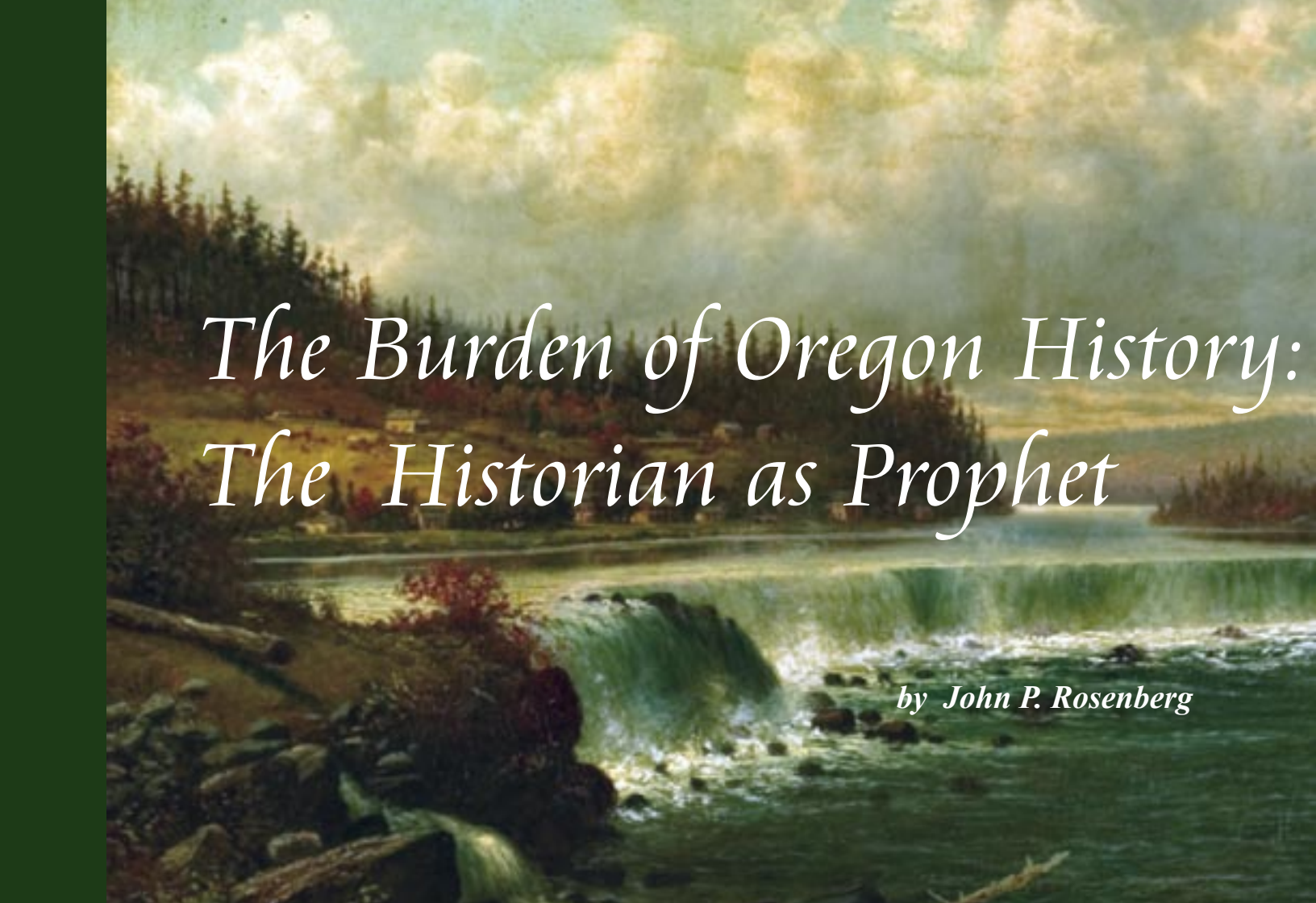
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# *The Burden of Oregon History: The Historian as Prophet*

*by John P. Rosenberg*

"Willamette Falls and West Linn Mill,"

*In 1986, a great scholar of the past saw our future.  
It was a mixed picture.*

Most serious historians avoid the temptation to predict the future. Theirs is the search for a usable past in which the disclaimer on the standard stock prospectus might prove equally appropriate: "Past performance is no guarantee of future gains." The widely attributed axiom that those who fail to learn from the mistakes of the past are destined to repeat them notwithstanding, historians are generally loathe to prescribe solutions drawn from history as an appropriate response to current challenges. Nevertheless, those who study the past can rarely avoid drawing conclusions however tentative, and sometimes they're willing to risk going public with them.

One such reluctant prophet was Gordon Dodds (1932-2003). From 1966-1999, Dodds taught Pacific Northwest History at Portland State University. With a rare combination of insight, humor, excellent scholarship and tenacious good cheer, Professor Dodds introduced several generations of undergraduate and

graduate students to the broad outlines and subtle nuances of our shared regional story. Though a person of deep political and religious values, Dodds rarely sermonized to his students. Whether giving a lecture, delivering a paper, or writing a chapter in one of his books, he respected his audience enough to allow them to draw their own conclusions regarding

*"I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son." – Amos 7:14*

the lessons to be learned from history. Still, there were exceptions.

In the latter part of his public career, after a lifetime of studying and thinking about the region and its people, Dodds began to write about "the tragedy of the lack of tragedy" in the lives of Pacific Northwesterners. Life had been relatively easy and perhaps "too successful" for the region's citizens, "especially if one were a Caucasian," wrote Dodds in the epilogue to his 1986 regional history, *The American*



a painting by Christian Eisele, 1889, OHS.

*Northwest: A History of Oregon and Washington.* Pacific Northwesterners had mastered their few difficulties with relative ease and their undemanding past may have left them unprepared for the adversities that lay ahead.

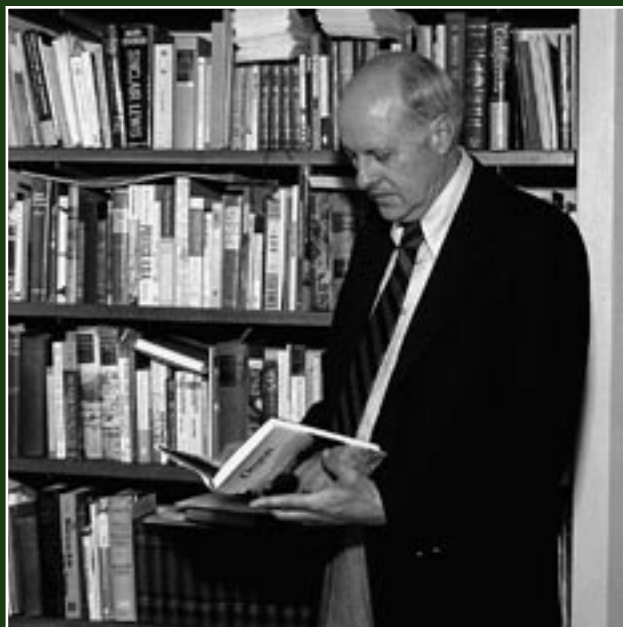
Whatever vague foreboding Dodds may have sensed when he wrote those words in the mid-1980s, the adversity he alluded to was not long in appearing. With the passage of the property tax limitation Measure 5 in Oregon in 1991, whatever fragile regional consensus existed regarding the public funding of education and social welfare programs came crashing down. The passage some 15 years later of Measure 37, which essentially dismantled Oregon's nationally acclaimed land-use planning system, completed the apparent sea change in regional self-understanding. Whatever reputation Oregon had previously enjoyed as a bastion of environmental commitment and liberal sentiment was now defunct. A brave new world of libertarian values and minimal government intrusion (or support) was ready to greet any new arrivals. While the changes in political sentiment in Oregon reflected the rise of conservative values nationally, they seemed especially pronounced here given the state's prior reputation.

All this, of course, begs the question of whether or not, given these apparently great changes in Oregonians' social and political self-understanding, the past in any sense could have served as prelude to someone who wanted to trace a vague outline of the future before it was thrust upon us in its present form. Were the seeds of Oregon's current dilemma buried in its past? Could an alert and curious historian who knew where to look have predicted the current state of affairs, in which every session of the legislature, for example, pits proponents of public education against supporters of social welfare programs for an every-shrinking revenue pie? What happened to the Oregon that, despite its eccentricities and contradictions, many of us knew and loved before 1991? And was its rapid demise predictable?

As a matter of fact, yes.

In the late 1980s, Gordon Dodds was invited to deliver a lecture to the Washington County Historical Society. Self-consciously paraphrasing the famous historian of the

American South, C. Vann Woodward, he titled his lecture, "The Burden of Oregon History." Woodward's book, the *Burden of Southern History*, lamented the South's historical struggle with Civil War defeat, racism, and chronic underdevelopment. At the time of his lecture, Washington County was a hotbed of fervor for limiting property taxes after the style of California's Howard Jarvis and the infamous "Prop 13." Dodds, at least in this lecture, never addressed the question of property taxes. Instead, he outlined a series of four historical developments that "have given the most national publicity to our region, that have defined our state to our countrymen." In these four developments, he saw qualities to celebrate. But he also



**Historian, Gordon Dodds.** Photograph courtesy of Linda Dodds.





Courtesy of the Oregon State Legislative Administration

*Overlanders respected American traditions and institutions and were "proud"*



William S. U'Ren  
OrHi #49958

saw things that troubled him as he contemplated the future.

The historical developments that he lifted up might have been included on anyone's short list of Oregon's accomplishments – the westward migration via the Oregon Trail; the so-called "Oregon System" of progressive political reforms including initiative, referendum, and "woman suffrage" (a 19th century term); the environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s; and the establishment of the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC).

Dodds did not gainsay the tangible achievement that these four accomplishments represented.

He pointed out, for example, how the overlanders drew upon the best of tradition to democratically choose leaders, to make important decisions, and to maintain a sense of justice and order both on the trail and upon their arrival in the Oregon country. They respected American traditions and institutions and "were proud of their nation's history, confident of its present, hopeful for its future." Furthermore, they gained a personal and collective sense of power, cooperation, and a conviction that "the American system of politics and law, at least in rudimentary fashion, had worked." In short, the Oregon pioneers were successful.

This sense of success was not restricted to those who had made the journey via the Oregon Trail. It also carried over into state politics once statehood was achieved and the pioneers began to establish themselves in their new home. By the end of the 19th century, Oregonians took steps to insure their success in the face of what they saw as the corrupting influences of the railroads, free-market capitalism, and the rampant use of alcohol. Their solution was the initiative and referendum, promoted by William S. U'Ren, which later became known as the "Oregon System" (despite the fact that Utah and South Dakota predated Oregon in their adoption of both reforms). One result was that in 1912, through the tireless ef-



*of their nation's history, confident of its present, hopeful for its future."*

forts of Abigail Scott Duniway and others, Oregon became the sixth state in the Union to adopt woman suffrage.

Woman suffrage shared similarities with the Oregon System that provided a key to understanding the state, according to Dodds. It was "value free" in the sense that its proponents argued for the change for its own sake, not for what it would produce by way of specific social or economic reforms. Second, it was based upon conservative principles such as democracy, equality, and natural rights. Third, it didn't cost the taxpayers one cent. Contemporary observers trying to come to grips with Oregonians' support of two initiatives making theirs the only state in the Union to legalize physician-assisted suicide might recognize the same principles as among those used in defense of that controversial social policy in the face of strong opposition by religious conservatives at both the state and federal level.

But it was Oregonians' unique response to the environmental movement that showcased what Dodds sometime referred to as the state's "cheap progressivism." With the exception of new enforcement powers that were given to the State Sanitary Authority to speed the clean-up of the Willamette River under the leadership of Governor Tom McCall, neither the so-called "bottle bill" (which required consumers to pay



**Writer, newspaper publisher, and women's rights advocate, Abigail Scott Duniway votes.** OrHi #4601a.

a 5-cent deposit on most soft-drink and beer containers to discourage littering) or the establishment of the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) in 1975 (which was one of the first pieces of legislation in the country to enforce state-wide land-use planning) represented an undue burden on the



## What happened to the Oregon that, despite its eccentricities and contradictions, many of us knew and loved before 1991?

state's taxpayers. The bottle-bill was self-enforcing, Dodds pointed out, while the major weakness in the creation of the LCDC was that it initially provided no financial support for overburdened local governments that were expected to do the heavy lifting in meeting the legislation's lofty goals.

In the concluding portion of his lecture, Dodds quoted a lengthy passage from a 1940s H. L. Davis essay entitled "Oregon" that appeared in *Kettle of Fire*. (Dodds used the final sentence in his epilogue to *The American Northwest* as well):

*It was Oregon all right: the place where stories begin that end somewhere else. It has no history of its own, only endings of histories from other places; it has no complete lives, only beginnings. There are worse things.*

Why Davis and why that quote? What did the crossing of the trail, the Oregon System, woman suffrage, and environmental legislation have to do with the burden of Oregon history and H. L. Davis's take on the spirit of that history? "I hope to conclude by making this clear," wrote Dodds, "and to do so by abandoning history and reminding you of some current events and of some contemporary characteristics of Oregon's citizens in both their public and private activities."

It was in the realm of acceptance of the public's responsibility for taxation, which he called "the basic test of modern civic spirit," that Dodds aimed the brunt of his critique. His fellow Oregonians' reluctance to maintain, "let alone increase" the level of property taxes was (and is) well known. Combined with a fierce refusal to raise income tax rates along with the failure to adopt a sales tax despite seven (count 'em!) attempts, Oregon's social and cultural infrastructure was beginning to show the results of her citizens' fiscal neglect. Dodds saw the refusal to provide adequate support for public education as a sign of "Oregon's individual and collective irresponsibility towards the common good as evidenced in pervasive drug use, contempt for people's health, slighting of support for the arts and education, and indifference to religious affiliation." He found the private realm no more promising than the public one in this regard.

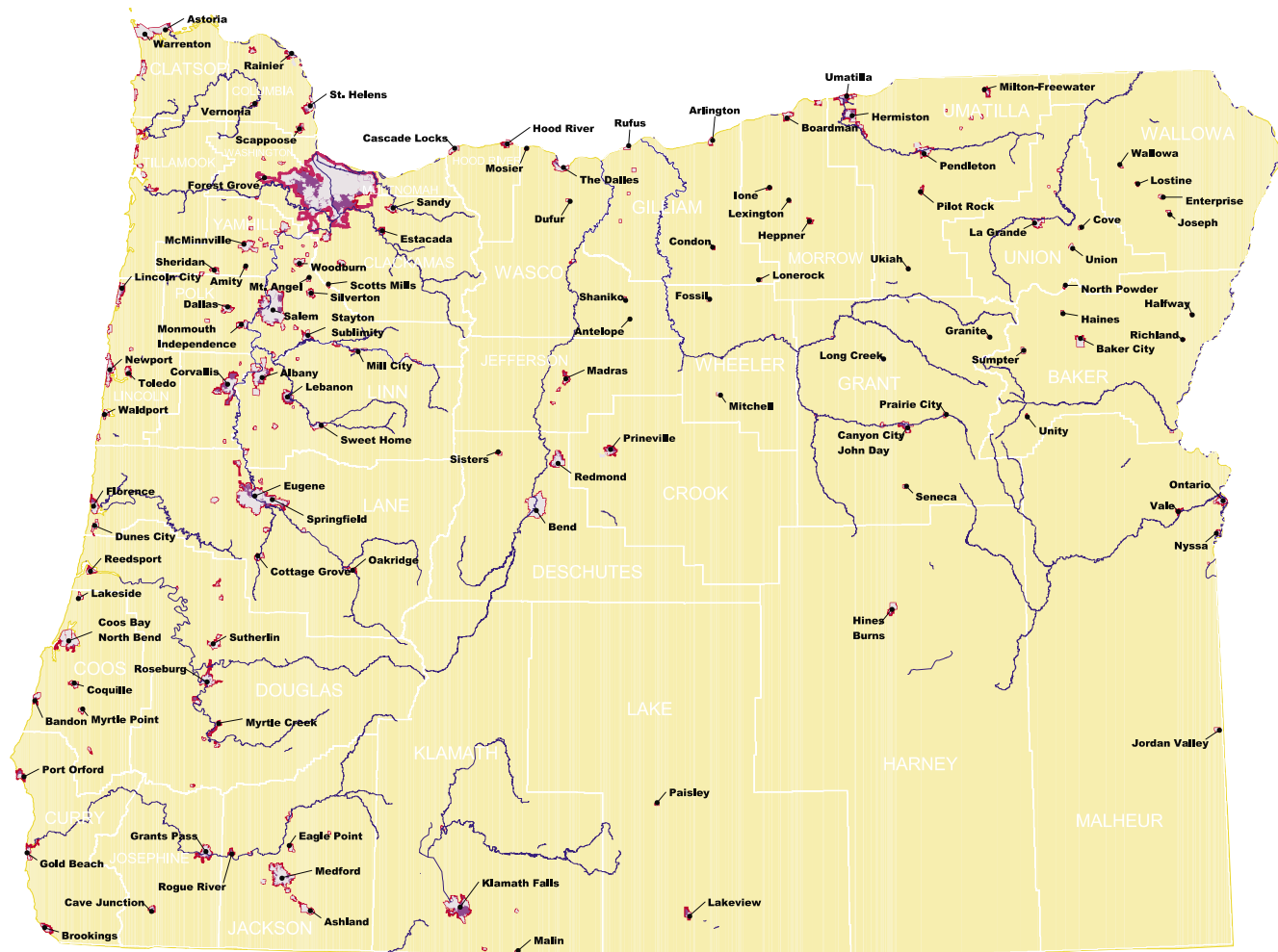
How did it come to this? Echoing his earlier 1986 epilogue, he wrote, "My contention is that the nature of Oregon's successful past has to a large extent contributed to these current problems and to what looks



Former Governor Tom McCall talking with an opponent of the non returnable bottles and cans at a Feb. 2, 1970 demonstration by members of the YWCA. OrHi CN #012697.

like may be a very gloomy future." Oregon's burden was the very opposite of what Woodward considered to be that of his native South. "Our burden is historical achievement and fulfillment, success in other words, not failure, frustration, and defeat. Much of our progress is the result of individual striving, not the consequence of the collective pursuit of the common good . . . what we have is a successful, but not a very useful history." There were better things.

In the years following his presentation of this lecture both at the Washington County Historical Society and later, in slightly different form, to the Portland State University Friends of History, Dodds often told of a woman in the audience who upbraided him for his pessimistic outlook. He sometimes sardonically compared himself to the famous Puritan preacher, Jonathan Edwards, whom he described as an essentially joyful person who had been called upon to deliver a gloomy message. He never gave up hope for his fellow Oregonians, but he never backed away from his sobering conclusions about their lack of commitment to the common good. "Idaho with a coastline," he quoted a cynic's observation about the



Under Goal 14 of Oregon's Statewide Planning Goals and Guidelines, urban growth boundaries have been established by every municipality in the state to provide an orderly and efficient transition from rural to urban land uses.

state. "A place where nobody is willing to make the hard sacrifices for the public welfare and where everyone thinks this is the best of all possible worlds, and where there is little concern for the welfare of future generations."

Nearly two decades after Gordon Dodds first publicly shared his dire prophecies about the adopted homeland that he studied and deeply cared for, it's fair to ask whether or not his critic was correct when she chided him for the darkness of his outlook. Articulate fiscal conservatives would be quick to question Dodds' use of the willingness to pay taxes as "the basic test of modern civic spirit." They might also argue vociferously that what Dodds interpreted as self-centeredness—i.e., progress as a result of individual striving—is precisely how the common good can most effectively and efficiently be pursued. Oregonians have always been freethinking libertarians at heart. Recent efforts to limit the size of government by severely limiting taxes and removing government's ability to restrict individual property rights through centralized land-use planning only prove that people who mistook Oregon for a "liberal" state simply hadn't bothered to carefully study our history. What Gordon Dodds saw as a "very gloomy future" was for people like Don

McIntire and Oregonians In Action, merely another name for the Promised Land.

But Dodds was not the only regional historian to express a fear that the "success" of Pacific Northwesters' collective past might not have fully prepared them for the challenges of the future. Writing only a few years later about the immense challenges posed for the region by the listing of threatened and endangered salmon under the Endangered Species Act and the threat it posed to the region's economic, social, and political fabric, historian Richard White discussed the Columbia River in tones that echoed Gordon Dodds:

*As the century comes to an end, the river we have partially created changes before our eyes, mocking our supposed control. It changes, and as it changes, it makes clear the insufficiencies of our own science, society, and notions of justice and value. The Columbia runs through the heart of the Northwest in ways we never imagined. It flows along the borders of the numerous divisions in our fractured society.*

Writing in the epilogue of his own two-volume history of Oregon, William G. Robbins also called attention to what he saw as a failure on the part of the region's

citizens to take the necessary steps to preserve, protect, and enhance “this special place.” Referring to the Roman Catholic Bishops’ 2001 pastoral letter, “The Columbia Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good,” Robbins wrote:

*Lives centered in privacy, charter schools, gated communities, and huge houses were not part of the bishops’ statement. Because I see an erosion of our attachment and affection for places everywhere, I believe the bishops’ argument carries a powerful contemporary message for Oregonians. Like all Americans, we have become an increasingly rootless people, a collective behavior that has diminished the influence of place as a moral force in shaping social, civic, and environmental values. Our overly acquisitive habits, our propensity to accumulate material things, and our fascination with the latest technology have blinded us to social and economic injustices and environmental damage in our communities. There is no better test*

*of our collective will, I believe, than the stewardship we exercise toward each other and toward the world about us.*

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the role of the prophet was less about predicting the future and more about serving as a visionary and extrapolator: one who took the long view in light of ethical and religious values in order to exhort the community regarding where a given course of action was likely to lead if left unchecked. One of the most famous was the prophet Jeremiah, for whom the jeremiad (defined as “a bitter lament or a righteous prophecy of doom”) is named.

Throughout the book that bears his name, Jeremiah regularly rails against prophets who “deal falsely,” are “greedy for unjust gain,” and carelessly cry “Peace, peace, when

there is no peace.” If historians like Gordon Dodds are reluctant prophets, no one can accuse them of a false sense of optimism. In any case, a prophet can only point the way. Our values and our future are in our hands. **M**

### Further Reading

H. L. Davis, *Kettle of Fire*, William Morrow, 1959.

Gordon B. Dodds, *The American Northwest: A History of Oregon and Washington*, Forum Press, 1986.

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*John P. Rosenberg of Vancouver studied history under Gordon Dodds as a graduate student. He currently serves as the pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Gresham, Oregon.*



Cannon Beach rally ca. 1968. In 1967 the “Oregon Beach Bill” was enacted under then Governor Tom McCall. Oregon’s Beach Bill guarantees that the public has free and unimpeded use of the beaches along Oregon’s 363 miles of coastline. OrHi #91802



A Richard Haas mural depicts Oregon pioneers at the Oregon Historical Society.